

**Report on Disability and Neurodiversity – School of Politics and  
International Relations**

EDI Committee – internal document  
November 2022

## **Introduction**

This report aims to identify the issues affecting disabled students' learning experience at QMUL, and most specifically in SPIR. The first section will introduce disability in higher education and the main problem of ableism in academia. The second section will show how these issues impact QMUL and SPIR, drawing from an informal consultation with disabled students organised in May 2022. The last section will present short-term recommendations as well as discuss long-term considerations in addressing systemic issues.

## **I – Disability in higher education in the UK: overview**

The Covid-19 pandemic brought many challenges for higher education in the UK and considerably affected the learning experience of students at university. Although the transition towards a new learning and teaching paradigm characterized by remote (and hybrid) work was met with mixed feelings by students, the disruptive nature of covid did not feel like a novelty for disabled students. Rather, it represented an additional challenge to the struggles they faced prior to the pandemic.

In addition to already-existing bureaucratic delays, only 29% of students eligible for DSA (Disabled Student Allowance) received government's support during the 2019/2020 period (The Guardian 2022). According to a report by Policy Connect's Higher Education Commission – an independent body comprised of various experts and actors of the public sector, including politicians – on the experience of disabled students in the UK, the pandemic has made the inclusion of disabled students even more difficult, as higher education institutions (HEIs) have to find a balance between an overgrowing proportion of disabled students coming forward since the mid-2010s and constant staffing and material shortages (Policy Connect Report 2020). Testimonies we gathered during an informal consultation with two disabled SPIR students reflected the findings of the report, especially the bureaucratic burden and the lack of information surrounding disability (notably the process of disability disclosure).

## **Ableism in Academia**

The root cause of (unvoluntary) exclusion of disabled students in higher education – whether through the poor enforcement of reasonable adjustments such as the implementation of student's

learning support plan, or limited accessibility to online and physical resources (Policy Connect Report 2020, p.21) – resides in the fact that academia’s structure is inherently ableist. Campbell defines ableism as a system of network and beliefs legitimizing a specific concept of mind and body setting up a standard of “normalcy” and ultimately, what it is to be human (Campbell 2020, p.204, 207). The definition of humanity here is one that corresponds to what Peruzzo identifies as the current neoliberal zeitgeist (Peruzzo 2020). In her analysis, neoliberal academia is subjected to the rules of the market and hence promotes processes of knowledge production implicitly reproducing dynamics of market competition. Every aspect of the academic institution (curriculums, bureaucratic organization etc.) is tailored in a way assuming that academics, staff, and students are all rational agents and, until a certain extent, “able” (of mind and body) to *produce* and *adapt* to any given situation. This in return establishes what is an academic body, and what isn’t by excluding those who do not conform or correspond to a constructed body standardizing good health, productivity, performance, attractiveness, and agility (Peruzzo 2020, p.38, 41).

In university, the exclusion of disabled students is therefore manifest – implicitly and explicitly – in the way they are told that they do not satisfy to the “corporeal standard”. Implicitly through the inconsistency of university staff in making sure that disabled students’ demands are effectively met, and explicitly in some cases through academic staff’s refusal to provide material in advance as they deem this process to be “unnecessary” (Policy Connect Report 2020, p.22).

## **II – Focus Group: findings**

To assess the learning experience of disabled students within the SPIR department, we invited students who identified as disabled to an informal consultation so they could talk about their frustrations and discuss solutions to the latter. Unfortunately, the consultation was scheduled at the end of exam period, and we did not receive as many participants as we hoped. We only had two volunteers across SPIR (undergraduate/postgraduate/PhD). Due to the low numbers, this study is not representative and just provides an indication of student thoughts and frustrations.

The two participants were affected by both visible and unseen impairments (Martin 2020, p.84). The student with an unseen impairment was diagnosed with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder), a neurodiverse condition also involving other biological pathologies and functional alterations (Celani 2004; Waisman & Simmons 2018, p.318). In practice, individuals with autism find autonomy in repetitive activities, and generally suffer from deficiencies in social interaction and

communication that can be obstacles in both academic and non-academic environments (Van Hees, Moyson & Roeyers 2015, pp.3-4). The other student is deaf, whose impairment resulted from progressive hearing loss over the years. Although they do not suffer from a deficiency in oral speech, they need assistive technology – such as speech-to-text tools like captions (Alsalamah 2020) – to ensure mutual communication. The learning experience of deaf and hard-hearing students can be extremely difficult (considering that sign language interpreters are not always available) if such tools are absent from the academic environment.

Testimonies of the two students were consistent with the findings of the Policy Connect Report. The university's bureaucratic structure and the ableist dynamics within SPIR were cited as being the most problematic features for the disabled students.

### **Bureaucratic hurdles**

Regarding the bureaucratic aspect, the disabled student with a visible impairment we interviewed complained about having to chase down the staff to get the support university committed to provide to them at the beginning of their studies. Moreover, they underlined the lack of information from the academic administration when it came to keeping students up to date about changes in staff. They told us for instance that they had to change advisor – process they had to undertake themselves – on multiple occasions (three to four times) during their joint honours programme and that there was a time where the advisor they had been allocated was not working at QMUL anymore. As mentioned in the Policy Connect Report, it clearly illustrates the wider problem of bureaucratic burden faced by disabled students in higher education where disabled students take the toll of coordination issues that do not even concern them directly, such as communication problems between departments (Policy Connect Report 2020, pp.32-51)

Another issue regarding disability support mentioned by this student concerned the general problem of self-identification as being disabled impeding the process of seeking for help which students with disability are normally entitled to. They reported that a friend of theirs suffering from severe medical conditions did not go to the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) because they did not identify as disabled. This case reflects the exclusion arising from the standard imposed by universities of having an official diagnosis by a healthcare professional to be entitled to disability support (Lynch & Macklin 2020, p.40). The problem here is that some healthcare professionals might not diagnose conditions explicitly as disabilities – even though these conditions might affect concerned students' learning experience in the same way as “officially recognized” disabled

students – and has the undesirable corollary effect of closing the door to affected students even though they are legitimate in having access to this help too.

## Ableism in SPIR

The second issue raised by the students was the ableist character underlying the form of SPIR's teaching. Form is understood here by all elements encompassing the teaching process and the material provided to support the latter. For instance, the deaf student deplored the fact that the practice of distributing all material in advance (slides, etc.) – practice that they qualified as being “the bare minimum” – was limited to a few members of the teaching staff only, rather than being a widespread one. The deaf student also provided another example of openly discriminatory practice of ableism echoing reports of some academic staff across the UK seriously degrading disabled students – by calling them “lazy” as they were asking for reasonable adjustments in terms of additional material (Policy Connect Report 2020, p.22). They told us that a teacher once refused to enable captions during a course as they denied the fact that the student was deaf; rather, they insisted on the fact that the student was simply not able to understand what they were saying.

Like for other higher education institutions in the UK, these conditions did not get better during the pandemic. Although some voices have argued that the latter would represent an opportunity to implement new ways of learning that would be inclusive (Read et. al 2020), ableist dynamics have been exacerbated during the last two years. Instead of proposing a radical transformation of university's learning space, the implementation of new learning devices was done in a way to maintain and satisfy the academic “normality” pre-pandemic. Said differently, and to echo Peruzzo's analysis, the solutions implemented two years ago perpetuated the individualist competition of knowledge production and performance characteristic of neoliberal academia – or, interchangeably, academic “normality” – which disabled students were already excluded from in normal times. In sum, rather than offering new possibilities for disabled students, the pandemic complicated the experience of disabled students even more.

## Isolation

Although some aspects of remote learning were perceived positively by the deaf student – especially the use of applications such as Microsoft Teams where caption and re-transcription features are available – distance learning did not suit the other student we interviewed, who is autistic. They told us that the pandemic made their 3<sup>rd</sup> year even more difficult as the lack of social contact intensified the feeling of isolation conferred by studies even more. The student experience in SPIR

involves a process of critical thinking and knowledge production that is highly individual – rather than collective – which can be mentally taxing at times. Having the possibility of exchanging with peers during the academic year under normal circumstances helps in alleviating part of this mental pressure. In addition to the lack social and academic exchange, the autistic student said that sudden changes and rapid adaptation were particularly stressful during remote learning. Shifts in established processes are extremely distressing for individuals with ASD as overall stability is mainly anchored in routines and patterns (Crespi 2021). Ableism through the maintenance of academic stability is manifest in those examples as the student complained about the lack of explanation regarding the realization of assignments under the new conditions, since academic staff was expecting all students to have the same capacity in handling the material that was provided. Like respondents with various mental health conditions – including ASD – in the Disabled Students Commission’s Covid-19 report (DSC report 2022, pp.6-7), they also struggled in connecting with their advisor, hence making their 3<sup>rd</sup> year dissertation more challenging.

### III – Recommendations

#### Short-term recommendations

##### **1. The creation of a disabled students’ network in SPIR**

Providing disabled students in SPIR with an in-person and online space in which they could meet with other disabled students would help alleviate feelings of isolation. As confirmed during our consultation, Kotera et. al reported in their study on online students with disabilities (OWSD) that disabled students felt less lonely when they were exchanging with other disabled students (Kotera et. al 2021, p.12). (Giving disabled students the opportunity to share their experiences in a collective manner would also give them agency in bringing their concerns and ideas for improvement to the School.) A successful example is Access King’s, King’s College London’s Staff Disability Inclusion Community Network. Although the network mainly targets the staff, it seeks to raise awareness about disability inclusion and improve university practices through a broad range of actions, including the organisation of events and regular meetings throughout the year. The success of the network is reflected in the fact that memberships drastically increased since its establishment in 2019 and that positive feedback from the events it has organized has helped in its expansion (Access King’s Report 2020, pp.6-7).

## **2. The inclusion of disability issues in the curriculum to normalize disabilities and neurodiversity and highlight them as important political issues**

As suggested by one of the students we interviewed, the School should incorporate the subject of disability in academic discussions. This would improve the representation of disabled students and contribute to the normalization of their situation. Scholars like Stephen Michael Christian underline the importance of treating the subject of disability – especially autism – in IR, starting by questioning the pervasive ableism within the discipline itself (Christian 2018). A way to include disability approaches within the curriculum would be to examine how disability intersects with other important critical studies in IR, like post-colonial and post-development studies (Christian 2018, pp.484-485). For instance, Raewyn Connell’s article “Southern Bodies and Disability: re-thinking concepts” is a great illustration of this kind of intersection, where she explains how impairment shaped the definition of important concepts – such as the North-South distinction – proper to the global socio-economic order (Connell 2011).

### **Long-term recommendations**

Regarding systemic issues going beyond the scope of SPIR, most of the reports assessing the experience of disabled students in HE in the UK agree with the fact that serious change can only happen if it comes from the top. The very first recommendation in NADP’s report on disabled students’ experience during the pandemic insists on the importance of better informing the academic staff about best practices in online teaching for all students, a recommendation that can only be enacted if the academic staff is incentivized by higher levels of seniority (NADP report 2020, p.14). In their 2021-2022 Annual Report, the DSC underlines sector roundtables confronting senior leaders and experts with disabled students’ feedbacks as one of their most efficient strategies in bringing disabled students’ experience on the forefront (DSC annual report 2022, p.8, 27). Here are a few examples of good practices that could be implemented on the long-term:

#### **1. Organization of multi-level committees to improve disabled students’ voices and representation**

The Policy Connect Report cites the University of Kent’s OPERA (Opportunity, Productivity, Engagement, Reducing barriers, Achievement) project aiming to improve inclusion through the creation of accessible information and assisting technologies (Policy Connect Report 2020, p.31). Parallel to the development of tools, the university’s Student Support and Wellbeing department is organising multiple committees at the senior level where senior staff members are sitting and receiving students’ feedbacks on a regular basis.

## 2. Anticipatory approach for courses and the enrolment stage

The Office for Students, an independent public body working with higher education practitioners in the UK, cites the Open University's anticipatory approach of developing a reviewer guide assessing whether its program material considers all students (Office for Students website). This guide is there to help practitioners preparing course material in advance and make sure that their teaching is inclusive. They also cite the Open University's "student profiling" effort in pre-screening hypothetical students, where practitioners (academics and staff) can anticipate the needs of students at the start of the enrolment process.

### Sources

Access King's Report (2020). How far have we come? Have far have we got to go? Accessible at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/hr/diversity/get-involved/networks/access-kings>

Alsalamah, A. (2020). Using captioning services with deaf and hard of hearing students in higher education: A systematic review. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 165(1), pp.114-127.

Brown, N. (2020). *Ableism in Academia*. UCL Press.

Connell, R. (2011). Southern Bodies and Disability: re-thinking concepts. *Third World Quarterly. Disability in the Global South*. Vol.32, no.8, pp.1369-1381.

Crespi, B. (2021). Pattern Unifies Autism. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. Vol.12, pp.1-7.

Cambpell, FK. (2020). The violence of technicism: Ableism as humiliation and degrading treatment. *Ableism in Academia*. UCL Press, pp.202-224.

Celani, G. (2004). Comorbidity Between Autistic Syndrome and Biological Pathologies: Which Implications for the Understanding of the Etiology? *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, Vol.16, no.2, pp.215-228.

Disabled Students' Commission (2022). Enhancing the disabled student experience - Annual Report 2021-2022.

Disabled Students' Commission (2020). Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences: in-depth qualitative report.

Kotera et. al (2021). Loneliness in online students with disabilities: qualitative investigation for experience, understanding and solution. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*. 18:64, pp.1-16.

Lynch, S., Macklin, J. (2020). Academic Ableism in Higher Education. Available at: <https://repository.uel.ac.uk/item/88w27>

Martin, N. (2020). A practical response to ableism in leadership in UK higher education. *Ableism in Academia*. UCL Press, pp.76-102.

National Association of Disabled Practitioners (2020). Covid-19: Disabled Students in Higher Education: Student Concerns and Institutional Challenges.

Office for Students' advice and guidance page: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/disabled-students/examples/>

Peruzzo, F. (2020). I am not disabled: Difference, ethics, critique and refusal of neoliberal academic selves. *Ableism in Academia*. UCL Press, pp.31-50.

Policy Connect Report (2020). Arriving at Thriving. Learning from Disabled Students to ensure Access for All.

Read, S., Parfitt, A., Bush, T. (2020). The Covid-safe university is an opportunity to end the default ableism in academia. LSE blog, "Impact of Social Sciences". Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/12/10/the-covid-safe-university-is-an-opportunity-to-end-the-default-ableism-of-academia/>

Rummery, K. (2020). From the personal to the political: Ableism, activism and academia. *Ableism in Academia*. UCL Press, pp.182-201.

Van Hees, V., Moyson, T., Roeyers, H. (2015). Higher education experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder: challenges, benefits and support needs. Springer Science and Business Media LLC. Available at: [https://core.ac.uk/display/55800867?utm\\_source=pdf&utm\\_medium=banner&utm\\_campaign=pdf-decoration-v1](https://core.ac.uk/display/55800867?utm_source=pdf&utm_medium=banner&utm_campaign=pdf-decoration-v1)

Waisman, TC., Simmons, M. (2018). Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Implications for Higher Education. *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de la Pensée Educative*, Vol.51, no.3, Special Issue, pp.317-338.

Weale, S. (2022). "Just 29% of students in England with disabilities receiving DSA allowance – analysis". *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/mar/10/just-29-of-students-in-england-with-disabilities-receiving-dsa-allowance-analysis>